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A. SERMON

PREACHED IN THE

MEETING-HOUSE OF THE FIRST PARISH,

IN HINGHAM,

JANUARY 8, 1865.

The Sunday after the Funeral of Mrs. Elizabeth Andrews Harding.

BY REV. CALVIN LINCOLN.

HINGHAM:
BLOSSOM & EASTERBROOK.
1865.

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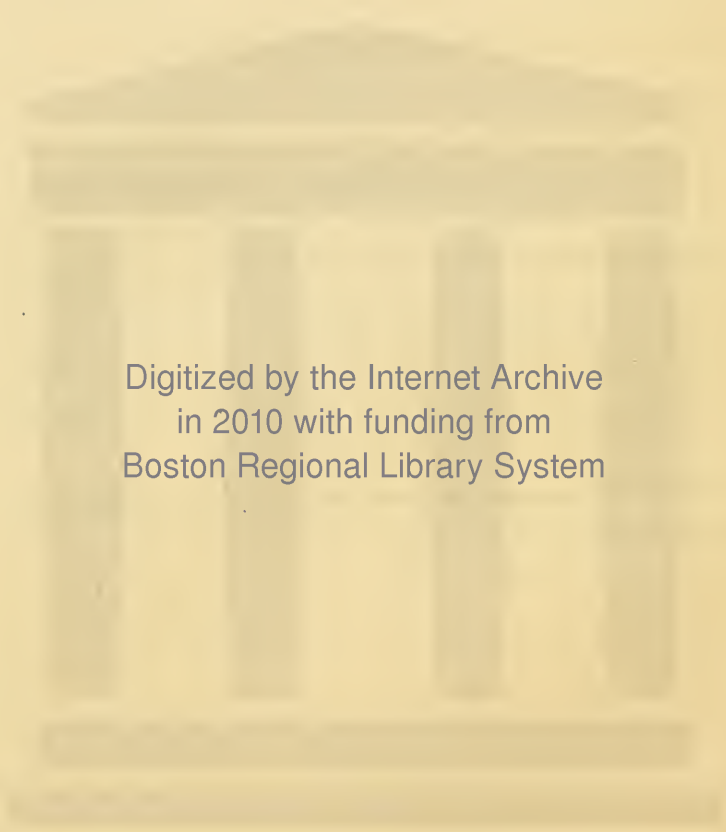
Mrs. Elizabeth Andrews Harding, wife of Henry C. Harding, Esq., of Hingham, and only daughter of Rev. Calvin Lincoln, died at St. Louis, December 31, 1864.

TO MY FRIENDS OF THE FIRST PARISH IN HINGHAM:

The following sermon was written and delivered under the immediate pressure of a great affliction. The marked attention with which it was heard, and the subsequent request that it should be printed, I cannot but attribute chiefly to your esteem and affectionate regard for my daughter, and to your interest in the bereaved families with which she was most intimately connected. As an expression of gratitude for your kindness and sympathy, it is submitted to your disposal.

One paragraph, omitted in the delivery of the discourse, is retained in the printed copy.

C. L.



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S E R M O N .

The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord. JOB i. 21.

IT is a very striking characteristic of the Sacred Scriptures, that they furnish for our use both the sentiments and the expressions which are suited to all the varying experience of human life. Their utterances are equally true to the deepest sorrows, to the intensest yearnings, and to the highest spiritual conceptions which are possible to our nature. Here also we find a full and clear recognition of our numerous earthly relations, their value, their tenderness, and their insecurity. But above all beside, the Bible reveals the character of God, assures us of his presence and interest in our condition and characters, his agency in controlling events, his wisdom and his paternal love. Divine revelation does not profess to explain all the mysteries of existence, to reply to all questionings suggested by the researches and discoveries of science, or to remove every difficulty which a sharp metaphysical analysis may propose; but it does that which is of unspeakably greater value. It proclaims truths of precisely the kind needed to strengthen us in virtue, to soothe our sorrows, and to awaken the inspiration of hope when our pathway is overshadowed with gloom. And it demands of us that we accept these disclosures with unquestioning

child-like faith, receiving them into our hearts, not as conclusions depending on the breadth and soundness of our own reasonings, but as doctrines stamped with the seal of Heaven, as the word of the Infinite to the finite mind.

The passage selected for our instruction this morning is an utterance of perfect faith, and of entire submission, — faith in God, and in his agency in the events of life. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away. All that we enjoy and most highly value is his bestowment; all our bereavements are the ordinations of his will.

This language confidently assumes, that God's providence is most intimately and constantly connected with the events of human life, and is fully supported by the instructions of our Divine Master. Jesus encouraged the hearts of his apostles to meet undismayed the trials which awaited them as preachers of a new religion, with repeated assurances that they would be constantly watched over and cared for by the providence of God. How explicit and strong is his language! The very hairs of your heads are all numbered. Not a sparrow falleth to the ground without your father. Ye are of more value than many sparrows. In this doctrine, the gospel requires our unhesitating faith. And, Friends, from this faith chiefly, at times, from this faith alone, must we derive strength for endurance, courage in difficulties, and consolation in all our sorrows. Consider, for one moment, what commanding, what heart-stirring and comforting truths are involved in this Christian doctrine of Divine Providence. How does it encircle us in arms of unlimited power. That Being,

who presides over the universe, whose word created all worlds, is perfectly acquainted with our condition, our trials, our needs and our sorrows. In the brightest and the darkest hour he is equally near; and our joys and our griefs are equally the appointment of his will. In this view, we are never alone; we are not left in our ignorance and helplessness to be crushed by the execution of inexorable laws, nor to be destroyed amid the wild confusion of unintelligent forces, moved by no controlling power, directed by no guiding purpose. There is both might and intelligence in the appointment and control of events; and no one of us, how frail, how unworthy soever we may be, is, for one single moment overlooked in the unmeasured extent of God's universal empire, or forgotten amid the countless subordinate designs embraced in an infinite, all-comprehending arrangement. Does any one reply, such knowledge is too wonderful for me, I cannot attain to it. None can measure the depths of the Divine nature. Were this possible, then God would be such an one as ourselves, and no longer worthy our supreme adoration, and our unfaltering trust. In lying low before him, in acknowledging his active sovereignty, and rightful proprietorship of all beings and all worlds, I bring myself into alliance with mind instead of unconscious force. I can cling to a being who notices and cares for me, and who *may* extend to me his love. The heavens and the earth, and life's relations, are no longer a meaningless chaos. I, myself, cease to be a mere uncalled and unnoticed atom, floating I know not whence, and driven I know not whither, on the terribly bleak ocean of chance. I have a place in the Creator's plans, and if

this be all that I know, it dispels, to some extent, the awful loneliness of my condition. For it assures me, when my purest earthly joys are extinguished, that my sorrow is appointed, that I am in the hand of God.

The Gospel, however, does not confine itself to the doctrine that God is present and active throughout every part of his vast dominions ; but proceeds much farther, and informs us that this unlimited power is invariably exerted in connection with perfect love. That the Supreme Being is a compassionate Father, and a loving Friend. The strongest terms are employed to give impression to this doctrine. God is love. If ye, being evil, know how to give good things to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give his Holy Spirit to them that ask him. Here, then, we are assured that all events, all life's circumstances, all our comforts, and all our bereavements, are appointed in absolute kindness, and are intended for our highest good. It must be thus. Perfect benevolence cannot afflict us gratuitously, nor in wanton cruelty. Almighty power is united with perfect benevolence and paternal compassion. We need not tremble before a dread sovereign, we need not fear to weep before a tender father, or to pour our cries and entreaties for help into the ear of a loving friend.

But the Gospel proceeds yet another step, and teaches us to believe in God's absolute wisdom. That he sees the end from the beginning ; that he knows all our exposures from within and from without, our temptations, our weaknesses, and our sins, by what methods our comfort may be increased, by what discipline our spiritual life may be most effectually improved. That

all events, not less those which are breaking our hearts with anguish, than those which throw a beam of gladdening light along the path-way of our earthly course, and through the circle of our domestic relations—are all, equally all, pledges of love and angels of mercy, and in a way, too hidden and mysterious to be now clearly seen and understood, are working out for us a greater good than we desire or can imagine. That we might receive these glorious doctrines into our souls, and understand and feel their power — God's own Son, the image of Divine perfections, came compassionately to our suffering and erring race, expressly to unfold them in a language which we could understand, and exemplify them in his own life, that we might more readily learn their import, and make them real to our hearts. And to represent God's interest in our welfare, (and we can imagine no stronger proof of Divine love,) he suffered and died and rose again, bringing to each one of us, for ourselves and our loved ones, the glad assurance of an immortal life. This scene of things is arranged to qualify our spirits for the peace, and joy, and society of Heaven. Absolute wisdom, love and power are ceaselessly engaged in executing this beneficent design. Surrounding circumstances, as they excite our powers, move our affections, try our fortitude, test our faith and our submission, are the instruments employed in our spiritual education, and that we may become partakers of Divine holiness. Were it not best for us that they should exist as they now do, as motives, trials or afflictions? we should have power to change them, or they would be changed in the order of God's providence.

If we receive these teachings of Revelation as little children, believing them in our inmost hearts, are we not furnished with all those fountains of consolation which we require, with all the truths of which we could probably avail ourselves were they spread before our minds? How could we, in view of our present characters and attainments, be more favorably situated, how could we have stronger evidence that all things are working together for our highest good? When this faith is firmly established in our souls, so that we recognize the divine hand in all events, perfect love and wisdom in their appointment, whether they fall on us with a crushing power, or revive and strengthen our hopes, when we believe in Jesus, a compassionate friend to the weary and sorrow-stricken, waiting to lift us out of our unsatisfying and shallow reasonings, and to lead us away from a cold and barren philosophy and enfold us in the arms of an inexhaustible love, — then, and not till then, are we prepared to say, even so, Father, for so it seemeth good in thy sight.

Possibly you reply, there are questionings and doubts which I cannot repress. I cannot, you add, clearly discover how divine agency can be constant and universal, and not interfere with my own action and responsibility. Nor can I see how present sorrows will be instrumental in advancing my highest happiness. My friend, you have never, I fear, duly considered the limitations to which your own powers are subjected. Could you see through all the plans of an infinite intelligence, could you trace every event in all its countless relations, in all its bearings on your eternal well-being, then you would comprehend the infinite, and would no longer

require the discipline of earth to unfold and perfect your powers. Still farther, did you know what would be the beneficent action of every sorrow on your future condition, you could never pray, If it be possible, let this cup pass from me ; nor could you ever add, Father, not my will, but thine be done. You would then walk by sight, and not by faith. The knowledge for which you now ask, this clearing up of all difficulties, would be incompatible with the weakness of your present powers, and the deepest needs of your moral nature. Moreover, how destitute of interest would be the future of your existence!—no new light, no new truths to greet your upturned eye, or enrich your advancing spirit.

Faith, resignation, acquiescence are graces essential in this early stage of our existence to give completeness to the character, and purity and fulness to the spiritual life.

To aid in accomplishing this gracious design, Infinite Wisdom has ordained the relations which we now sustain, the circumstances by which we are now surrounded.

Our text is not only an expression of faith and acquiescence, but equally of gratitude. It is an expression of thanksgiving to God, who gives and who takes away. The connection may appear to us unnatural, yet experience proves that we are never more inclined to perceive and acknowledge the kindness of heaven than when suffering under the weight of severe affliction. Are our hearts overwhelmed with sorrows, are our homes darkened and desolate, then, certainly, we had received from the Divine hand some priceless treasures. There was a time when we freely shared in the purest joys

and the richest satisfaction. Thus we are led to bless the name of the Lord as we remember past though now vanished joys.

When we believe those who are removed from our society were prepared for the life of heaven, with our whole hearts, we can bless God that with them the struggle is ended and the conflict over, — that they have been released from the anxieties and pains, the temptations and tears of this disciplinary state, and rejoice, if we truly love them, that they now breathe a purer air, are occupied in more ennobling pursuits, enjoy a holier companionship than earth could know.

May the great truths which I have tried to present afford strength and comfort to those parents in whose home the voice of childhood* has been recently silenced. Their departed son was a child of rich promise. Intelligent, amiable, and docile, he won the love of all who knew him. Full of life and joy, his presence kindled new life in other hearts, and spread a cheering influence around their fireside and their table. His moral and religious nature was early awakened. He thought of God and heaven in the severe suffering which attended his last sickness, and evinced a patience and submission unusual so early in life. Of such is the kingdom of heaven.

I shall not speak to you at much length of my own great sorrow. I dare not trust myself in attempting any appropriate and full delineation of my daughter's character. Still I cannot refrain from saying a few words of her religious life. Were I to be entirely

* Everett L., only child of Loring and Emeline H. Jacob.

silent on this point, I fear that I should be unfaithful to the interests of Christian truth, and appear to be ungrateful for the satisfaction with which I remember the past, and the sustaining hopes with which I now think of her entrance on a higher life. She was always a dutiful child. Her sympathies were easily moved, and from early life she manifested the tenderest interest in the sufferings of others. Her disposition was amiable, her feelings were always kind, and gentleness marked her temper. She was self-forgetful, more thoughtful for the gratification and happiness of others than for her own. Bright, cheerful and affectionate, almost constantly occupied in some plan for the comfort and welfare of her friends, she was a priceless treasure, a ray of pure sunlight in the home of her childhood, and in that home to which in later years she was transferred.

But the crowning excellence of her character, that which gave consistency to her life, which beautified and ennobled, and rendered so useful to others, the gifts of mind and heart with which she was liberally endowed, was her Christian faith, her strong religious principles.

She early recognized the sacredness of her relations to the Creator. She was early touched by the purity and beauty of the Savior's life, and her heart was moved by his death of disinterested love; and I believe that she early consecrated herself to the service of God, and determined, with his assistance, to be faithful in life's great work of duty. With such convictions and aims, if true to herself, if just to all her purest sentiments and clearest perceptions of right, she could not do otherwise than avow herself a disciple of

Jesus, and join in observing the commemorative rite which he had instituted. This faith nourished a sweet submissiveness to the Divine will, under all those trials and disappointments which are incident to every situation in life. This faith purified her taste, influenced her choice of books to be read and studied, gave a tone to her conversation and correspondence, and kept alive in her soul the temper of heaven. It is a rich satisfaction to remember, that while on earth, even to her last breath, she was always surrounded by loving friends, and that she was addressed in those tones of kindness which her own gentle spirit so much craved. She was happy while here. I believe she is now happy in that higher life of which her last utterance seems to me prophetic — when smiling, she whispered to the friend at her bedside, “I am going home.”

In closing this discourse, let it not be forgotten that the purpose for which God has ordained the trials of earth, discloses at once, and most distinctly, the great work of life. Are you diligently engaged in executing this work? Are you living by faith in the Son of God? Are your affections placed on things above; and are you striving to become more thoroughly imbued with the Savior’s spirit, and more fully prepared for the society of Heaven? If hitherto you have failed to consider the real design of your present existence, and have lived regardless of your plainest duties and most sacred relations, I entreat you to commence at once, and with all possible earnestness, the acquisition of the Christian character.

Be assured, these are not mere words of course. I have written them while resigning most fondly cherished

hopes, and with the deepest conviction of responsibility for the words which I utter, and the impression which they are suited to leave on your minds. If, through your awakened sympathy—for which we sincerely thank you,—this exhortation shall find access to your hearts, then it will be good for you, as well as for me, that I have been afflicted.

Lines Contributed by a Friend.

“ENTERED THROUGH THE GATES INTO THE CITY.”

(REV. XVII. 15.)

Into the city ! In silence deep
 The pearly gates unclosed once more ;
 Hushed was the fall of her parting feet,
 As gently she passed the threshold o'er ;
 Only the light of that peaceful brow
 Reflecting splendors earth never guessed,
 Told that the spirit had entered in
 The holy city of Love and Rest.

Into the city ! A little way
 Our faith may follow her “ shining trace ; ”
 May see in vision the jasper walls,
 The golden streets of her dwelling-place ;
 May catch the gleam of her robes of white,
 As low she kneels 'mid the countless throng,
 May see in her hand the victor palm,
 And know her voice in the ceaseless song.

Into the city ! whose purer joys
 Were ne'er to prophet or saint revealed, —
 To clasp the loved ones of earth, and share
 The bliss of the souls that God has sealed ;
 To lean for aye on the Savior's breast,
 Where life's glad river forever flows,
 And feel the sun of the Father's smile,
 The rapture that perfect love bestows.

Into the city ! Why stand we here
 Gazing so steadfastly into heaven ?
 Her angel whisper comes floating on,
 Hallowed, and soft as the breath of even,
 “ A few more steps of the onward way,
 A little longer to watch and wait,
 And ye, with sorrow and tears all past,
 May enter the city through the gate.”



